

“Tell What You See”

A sermon based on Matthew 11:1-11 and Isaiah 35:1-10

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The Autumn when Jean and I moved to Wisconsin, 1992, set records for the number of overcast days that fall. The memory is seared in my mind. From the first of October through the end of December, there were 4, four days of sunshine.

This autumn, here, has not been that bad. When the sun has been out, it's been wonderful, but it seems it's been much more gloomy than not since October.

Maybe we might find ourselves in the right frame of mind for having a sense of John's state of mind in prison, where we meet him in the Gospel passage for today. I imagine him remembering the glory days when he was living the simple life out in the wilderness, wearing camel hair and eating honey-covered locusts. Nothing but blazing sun during the day, and the star-filled vault of sky at night.

And the crowds who came to hear his preaching by the river. He was living a good, righteous life, close to the ground and close to God. He was preaching repentance, and people were repenting! They were listening and responding. For a preacher, it doesn't get any better than that. He was seeing people's lives change. I imagine John smiling as he remembers all of this.

Then he remembered the day his cousin came to the river. That day, he knew that he was looking at God's Lamb. And when Jesus came and asked to be baptized, he knew that Jesus should be baptizing him. Once Jesus came up out of the water, and the sky split and the voice said, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well-pleased," John knew that God's new order of the Spirit was about to break out far and wide over the landscape. Finally, evil-doers and oppressors would be smitten. Judgment day was at hand on the threshing floor.

Maybe this is why John spoke out so boldly against King Herod and his adultery with his brother's wife. Herod, and more likely, Herodias, grew quickly

tired of John's Old-Time religion, and they shut him up in prison. Now, all John can do is reflect and remember.

Separated from the desert landscape he loved and that had nurtured him, John grew increasingly blind, knowing the blindness that comes from being locked up. Where before he could look out on the entire landscape, in prison, he could see only the confines of his dungeon cell.

Confined in such a way, removed from everything that oriented him, and helped him make sense of the world, certainly John grew more depressed and uncertain. He was as gloomy as one of our recent days.

You know how it is, when your inner landscape darkens, and when your view of the world seems to collapse in upon you. Your perspective suffers, and you don't see things as others do. You either see things entirely too gloomily, or you make entirely too much out of what is not that much.

These are times when we depend on our true friends to shine a light into our dungeons, and to expand our horizons. Sometimes, if they are very close friends, we may even trust them to tell us to "Get a grip!"

That is where we find John this morning. Gone are the excitement and the certainty of those days in the wilderness by the river. Gone is his clarity of vision. And even his hope seems to be dimming.

Having heard reports about Jesus' ministry, John apparently becomes confused. God's new order of the Spirit is not coming as John expected. Rather than giving evil the business, rather than judgment coming on the threshing floor, John is hearing that Jesus has said things like:

"See, I send you out like sheep into the midst of wolves..."

"They will hand you over to councils..."

and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me."

"When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next."

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."

Did he really baptize the Messiah in the river? Did John have it all wrong? Not a sparrow will fall...? Well, what about a prophet?

John had the gathering sense that he probably would fall. What did it all mean? John wasn't sure anymore.

So he sent messengers to Jesus. Are you the One, or should we look for another?

II

It is the question we always face, trapped in our various kinds of prison cells, whether of suffering or of sin. Finding our lives suddenly diminished in one way or another, feeling deeply the pain that comes with suffering, or the brokenness that comes with sin, we begin to doubt all of our previous certitudes. And we begin to question, just like John does. Did we have it all wrong? Should we look for another, another set of principles, a different way of caring for our bodies, or new habits that will save us from temptation?

When those times come for us, we will do very well if we follow John's example. Send your prayers as messengers to Jesus for understanding. For he is our certainty. He is our strength. He is our life. Seek the Lord, and he will answer you.

That is what John did. His messengers came to Jesus and asked, "Are you the One, or do we look for another?"

Jesus was not put off by John's uncertain seeking. He understood, and gladly gave an answer John could appreciate. Jesus told the messengers to tell John what they see. The blind see. The lame walk. The diseased are made well. The deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life. Tell him what you see, Jesus said.

It may sound like a cryptic answer. "Jesus, just give us a straight answer," we may want to cry. "Are you the One, or not?" But Jesus was not being cryptic. He wanted to call to John's mind the prophecies of old, like the one from Isaiah that we've heard this morning.

Isaiah was blessed with a vision of the day when God's Deliverer will come, no, when God will come to deliver the people. And Isaiah wrote that on that day, "...the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unsealed, the lame will leap like the deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy."

Jesus was gently correcting John while answering his question. For John's expectations were misplaced. He was looking for the glorious coming of the Deliverer, when evil will finally be defeated, oppressors will be overthrown, and God's reign will finally be established on the earth. That is the coming we still anticipate.

Yet, Jesus was the Deliverer. He was God's chosen One. But his first coming was that of the Suffering Servant. He would overcome by turning things upside down. The deaf were made to hear, the blind to see, the lame to leap, and the dead to rise again. His strength would be made perfect in weakness. His way would be the way of the cross.

So Jesus is telling John that, yes, he was right about Jesus. He did prepare the way for God's Lamb. He has even prepared the way in prison, and he will prepare the way in his death. For like him, Jesus will be captured, and held, and executed.

That is what Jesus was telling John. And that is why Jesus says John was the greatest man who had ever lived. Jesus knew that, like him, John would remain faithful all the way to the deadly end.

But do you think John welcomed the report of the messengers? Do you think he liked having his misplaced expectations corrected? I suspect not. For even God's saints long to be free. They love living.

But I also suspect that John consented to the truth. Having heard the report, and having understood, John found comfort in knowing that he had played a part in God's surprising, but wise, plan of salvation. and he was prepared to face whatever might come.

John prepared the way for Jesus, and that made him great. But Jesus prepared the way for us, and that is why he said, "the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than" John. When we find ourselves in prison, either of suffering or of sin, or even in an actual prison or jail cell, we follow the path blazed by our Lord. And where he walked that way alone, we walk it with his companionship. He gives us his strength, his comfort, and his grace.

That is why we can be greater even than John. We face all of our trials in Christ, who endured great suffering, and death itself. He has traveled that dark road before us.

Christ does not promise us deliverance from our prisons, nor does he always grant us freedom from suffering. John was not freed. Nor was Paul delivered from his thorn. Instead, Christ promises to be present with us in our prisons. He promises to walk with us through our suffering. He promises to give us victory even over death, not by going around it somehow, but by going through it with us.

III

Tell him what you see, Jesus said. It may not have been the answer John was seeking. But through it, Jesus shined a ray of light into the bitter, cold and gloomy darkness of John's prison cell. And it was enough, for the light shall overcome the darkness. Life shall overcome death. The light does shine in the darkness.

Today, the scriptures and the music weave a pattern of light and dark, joy and sorrow, peace and violence. The light shines in the darkness. But the darkness is not eliminated Not yet.

Today, Gaudete Sunday, we are at the intersection of the light and darkness, at the edge of the shadow. And we, like John, are given reason to hope.

In this season of increasing darkness, when the days grow shorter and shorter, we light candles, small, fragile flames of light. And we declare to the world that it is enough.

Martin Luther wrote that one little word can defeat the evil one. We declare that a few little candles can overcome the darkness. Thanks be to God that the Light of Christ has dawned, and that one day soon, all the world will be filled with his light. AMEN.